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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the editorial commentary from 1931 to present to search for patterns that might be significant in understanding the evolution and current form of the literature review in educational discourse. Using as a primary database all of the editorial commentary from the "Review of Educational Research" from 1931 to 1998, this paper describes patterns of change in the commentary and relates it to the changing concept of the genre "literature review" through this time period. Findings reveal substantive changes in seven dimensions of review characteristics and contribute toward a better understanding of reviews today. Contains 14 references. (RS)

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Editorial Commentary in the Review of Educational Research, 1931-1998: A Study of Genre Construction

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Abstract

Using as a primary data base all of the editorial commentary from the Review of Educational Research from 1931 to the present, the author describes patterns of change in the commentary and relates it to the changing concept of the genre "literature review" through this time period. Findings reveal substantive changes in seven dimensions of review characteristics and contribute toward a better understanding of reviews today.

Editorial Commentary in the Review of Educational Research, 1931-1998: A Study of Genre Construction

In the last few decades, the study of written texts has gone beyond Biblical and literary studies to texts in the sciences and social sciences. The kind of discussions once reserved for, say, the nature of tragic drama or the imagery of a poem can now be found directed at such matters as the socio-historical development of the research article in science (Bazerman, 1988) or the style and structure of sales promotion letters used by businesses (Bhatia, 1993). This study is conducted in that tradition. It is a study of the genre "literature review" in educational discourse; specifically, it is a descriptive study of the changes in editorial commentary within the Review of Educational Research from the first issue in 1931 to the present. The broader goal of this study is not just to describe changes in editorial commentary over that time frame, but also to contribute to current understandings about the genre of literature reviews, especially as they appear today in educational journals and related publications.

The rationale for this study rests on the general assumption that better understanding of a genre will contribute toward being able to better use that genre as either a producer or consumer of texts within it. In this case, I'd argue that using wisely the results of literature reviews (including meta-analyses and other kinds of review and synthesis documents) is becoming increasingly important for educators, especially those who see themselves as facilitators of research-based change and school improvement in the years ahead. In all professions, including education, literature reviews will take on growing importance in an electronic era characterized by expanding access to burgeoning information.

Even granting this rationale, one might still ask "why bother to track over

time the editorial commentary in one review journal?" In part, the answer is that this particular examination of editorial commentary is one component of a larger project aimed at increasing understanding and the critical consumption of review and synthesis literature. But, the study also stands alone. Even though a host of factors have contributed to the nature and role of literature reviews today, the policies and practices of the RER--the premier review journal in education--is significant among them; and, within that journal, the editorial commentary merits some study. Obviously the guidelines and suggestions of the editors of this journal can influence the scholars producing reviews to be published in it. Not so obvious, perhaps, is that the reviews published by the RER can in turn influence the concept of "review" held by the readers of the journal. This is no small matter. As a publication of AERA, the RER has always had a wide readership among those most directly involved in the construction of knowledge bases that undergird education. The editors of the RER state that 17,000 people subscribe to their journal and that, after the Educational Researcher, it is the most cited of all education journals included in the Social Science Citation Index (1995). To the extent that this statistic is even roughly indicative of past readership, it points toward a significant number of educators constructing their concept of the genre "review" along lines sketched, at the very least, by the editorial commentary in the RER.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to analyze the editorial commentary over that period in a search for patterns that might be significant in understanding the evolution and current form of the literature review in educational discourse. Because it is a descriptive study and because it is a study of only one variable, any suggested links between the editorial commentary and reviews today must finally be considered speculation.

Methods

In brief, the procedure was a matter of reading all the editorial commentary during this time period and analyzing it. Preliminary decisions were made which inevitably entered into the final shape of the results. Two in particular should be considered here--decisions about what constituted editorial commentary and related decisions about the framework from which the analysis would be conducted.

Editorial commentary

The variable of interest, editorial commentary, was defined as all the editorial forewords, introductions, prefaces, and policy statements in the Review from 1931 to the present. These commentaries were considered the population for the study, and all were considered sources of data for analysis. The actual reviews in the journals were consulted as necessary to clarify editorial commentary, but they were not used as a data source.

Though this operationalization is relatively straightforward, two factors muddy the picture somewhat.

The first is that there was a major reorganization of the journal in the early 70's. RER was originally created by AERA as a triennial supplement to its Encyclopedia of Educational Research. The intended structure was that each three year cycle (five issues per year) would review the same or similar set of 15 topics. An issue chair was chosen by the general editor of the journal, and the issue chair in turn would select scholars to conduct the reviews (chapters) that would appear in each issue. The purpose, as stated in the first issue, was to cover "the whole field" of education as a service to "teachers, administrators, and general students of education" (Editors, 1931, p. 2). Although there were shifts in what would be considered appropriate topics, this operational structure prevailed through 14 cycles; then beginning in 1970 a new editorial policy went into effect. The editors began

accepting unsolicited reviews on topics of the contributor's choosing; and, in order to maintain the tradition of publishing reviews on a relatively common set of topics, the Annual Review of Educational Research was planned. The first issue of the Annual appeared in 1974, and it has continued ever since publishing commissioned reviews. The RER likewise has continued, publishing four issues a year containing (with some exceptions) unsolicited reviews that have survived a peer review process. For this study I considered only the editorial commentary in RER even after this split, but I did consult commentary in the Annual for purposes of clarification and amplification.

A second factor that complicates this variable was the variance in the speakers behind individual commentaries. In the early cycles of the RER, Forwards were written by the chair of the editorial board and Introductions by the chair of the committee doing reviews for a particular issue. (Later these positions were labeled "general editor" and "issue editor," but the roles of each remained the same.) Most issues had Introductions, but not as many had Forwards. Around volume 20, things changed. Forwards were being written by issue editors, and the general editor became less vocal. Indeed there were some cycles with no or very limited commentary of any kind; and, in more recent cycles, introductions of any sort have become reserved for more special issues or occasions. Unfortunately (at least from the perspective of rich data collection), submission policy statements and guidelines have replaced the more chatty commentary of the earlier issues. In short, the speakers making the comments have varied in many ways over the years. For this study I considered all commentary as one voice and analyzed from that perspective.

Framework for analysis

A six dimension taxonomy of literature reviews proposed by Harris Cooper (1988, 1994) was used as a framework for conducting the close analysis of each

instance of editorial commentary. Each dimension represents a characteristic of literature reviews as follows: (Within the parentheses following three of the characteristics are my own expansions and applications of the characteristics.)

Focus. The materials of primary interest to the reviewer. Though not claiming mutual exclusivity, Cooper lists four common foci: focus on the outcomes of research, the methods, theories, or practices/applications. A given review, according to Cooper, may focus on more than one of these with varying levels of attention. (In my analysis I considered "content" as part of this category. The content of reviews may, for example, be based on traditional school subjects such as math or reading; issues that schools need to address such as motivation problems or finance; and so on.)

Goal. What the reviewer hopes to accomplish. The most common goal is integration, to synthesize past literature on a given topic. Cooper sub-divides synthesis into three types: to arrive at generalizations, to resolve conflicts and inconsistencies, and to bridge gaps through a linguistic framework. Though synthesis is probably part of all reviews, other goals can be more central. Among these, Cooper lists criticism, the critical analysis of existing literature, and the goal of identifying central issues relevant to further endeavors in that field. (Because genre categories or types are closely connected with the purposes or goals texts serve, I used this category for discussing different types of reviews such as critical reviews or meta-analyses.)

Perspective. The reviewer's point of view. Cooper lists two, neutral representation and espousal of position. From the first point of view, reviewers attempt to provide objective analysis and synthesis reflecting the literature; from the second, reviewers are seen more as advocates of a particular point of view, and they use the literature to demonstrate the value of that point of view. Cooper acknowledges the dichotomy as an oversimplification of a complex issue surrounding authorial stance, but he emphasizes that perspective "refers more to how the works of others are treated than to the presence or absence of conclusions favoring one interpretation or another" (1988 p. 110).

Coverage. The extent to which reviewers cover the literature of the review topic. Cooper offers four; exhaustive, exhaustive with selective citation, representative (using a sample to represent the population), and central or pivotal (focusing on works the reviewer deems central to the topic). Cooper sees this characteristic as the one that sets reviews off from other expository forms. How reviewers search the literature and decide on suitability and quality of materials is unique to this kind of scholarship. (In my analyses, coverage was treated as explained above, but I also made explicit the criteria which editors stated or implied should govern the selection process.)

Organization. The structure of a review. Cooper list three: historical, works

reviewed in the order they appeared in the literature; conceptual, works grouped by overriding abstract ideas; and methodological, works grouped according to the methods employed.
Audience. The intended audience of the review. Cooper lists four kinds of audiences. But in fact only the first three--specialized scholars, general scholars, and practitioners/policy makers--are viable. He admits that reviews written for the fourth audience, general public, are rare. The general public tends to get reviews distilled and simplified through newspapers or popular magazines.

In addition, I added a seventh characteristic which I labeled "Role of Reviews." I was interested in the implied or articulated stance toward reviews as shapers as well as reflectors of professional knowledge. In part, this characteristic is related to the epistemology implied in a review, and the scheme which I used was suggested by Phillips' (1995) use of a continuum to display different dimensions of constructivism. Briefly, he placed positivism on one end and two constructivist "humans the creators" views on the other (one sociopolitical, the other individual). Similarly, at one end of my review continuum I put the relatively positivist authorial stance that truths (patterns, generalizations) exist in the literature and the reviewers job is to find them. At the other end I put a more constructivist insistence that reviews and reviewers play a role in shaping the patterns and generalizations. This "shaping" could refer to the literal influence of reviews on both producers and consumers of reviews (as discussed earlier in my rationale). Or it could refer to a more constructivist-like acknowledgement that language and genre significantly influence the kinds of environmental understanding individuals and groups can construct. Tushnet provides a different take on this latter perspective, seeing the shaping influence having to do more with the nature of synthesis than the nature of language and genre: "Research synthesis . . . often confronts conflicting findings. A variety of ways of dealing with conflicting findings exist . . . whatever method is used, the result is something different from the

individual studies comprising the basis of synthesis. In short, the result is a new construction of reality" (1992, p. 5).

For my purposes, this scheme allowed three classifications of the role of reviews implied by editorial commentary: reviews, if done well, report on patterns that exist in the literature; reviews influence the growth of professional knowledge by establishing directions for future research; and reviews shape the growth of professional knowledge by establishing categories for what can even be considered knowledge and/or by constructing new realities not present in any individual study or group of studies.

Results

The seven characteristics discussed above were used as a framework through which all data were analyzed. Within each of these seven the analysis was conducted, as much as possible, inductively. However, inductive analysis leads to patterns which in turn are modified or influence the analysis. Two such patterns are discussed below.

One pattern was a structure consisting of three blocks of time which I took as stages in the development of the concept "review" being implied by editorial commentary. The first stage began in 1931 and continued until the early 70's. The second continued until 1993 when it gave way to the third. These three stages will be further explained below where they are used to organize the results of the seven-component data analysis. The second pattern was more of an organic structure fed by a repeated theme in the commentary. It was likewise arrived at inductively, but I admit to finding it closely connected to one of Berkenkotter and Huckin's fundamental assumptions that genres serve two complementary/contradictory functions in a professional community. "[Genres] serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning," and at the same time they're always evolving as

"[they] change over time in response to their users' sociocognitive needs" (1995, p. 4). This dynamic between stability and change was a recurring theme in the commentary. The seeds of change were present from the beginning; they began to flower in stage two; and fully flowered in stage three (where new seeds are already within the commentary). Unlike the first pattern which has so explicitly partitioned the results reported below, this second pattern obviously metaphorical, informs the results below more subtly, woven into the summaries.

Stage 1--1931 to the early 70's

This stage, beginning in 1931 with the triennial operating structure discussed earlier, was the longest, lasting some 40 years. Although many changes were discussed, proposed, or actually realized during this stage, it was a relatively stable time with "seeds of change" steadily growing in each of the seven dimensions. The biggest change in this stage (at least in terms of genre construction) was initiated in 1970 which I've defined as the end of the stage. This date, it will be remembered, marks the beginning of the RER reorganization around a new editorial policy of accepting unsolicited reviews and the eventual publication of the Annual Review of Research in Education.

Focus. Given the audience and goal of the early RER, the focus was primarily on research outcomes. The reviews provided readers with some sort of "what does the literature say about" overview of topics such as curriculum, methodology, testing, physical development, guidance and counseling, and so on. However, methodology was not ignored. In the reviews themselves, study summaries typically included methods used in the study. In addition, several issues in this stage were committed to research methodology instead of the usual topics or issues. The seed of change was in the editors' constant quest to find the "right" topics or how to partition topics so that they represented what was really needed.

Goal. The main goal of the journal was to provide information that was useful to consumers. This was a recurring phrase evidenced by such expressions as "great service," "practical guide," "useful," "more helpful," "handy companion," and so on. To accomplish this goal of usefulness, the early editors called for reviews to be integrative and that there be "critical

comment" about the literature within these reviews. Over time in this stage, the linguistic structures containing these two words (integrative and critical) conjoined them ("integrative, critical reviews") and later, especially in the third stage, they evolved into the two types of reviews published by the journal, integrative and critical. Two things should be noted about this emergence of critical reviews. First, in the early cycles synthesizing literature seemed to be largely a matter of summarizing studies. This is evidenced in the editorial commentaries themselves, where the word summarize is often used, but it's also apparent in the reviews themselves. Especially in the earlier cycles, they were little more than a series of study summaries. Second, though critical evaluation of the literature was expected from the onset, the reviews were essentially integrative and criticism was apparently hard to come by. Frequently there were editorial apologies or complaints because criticism was scant (often because of space limitations) or editorial pleas for more critical activity from contributors. Indeed a major motif of this stage was the repeated request that reviewers should focus more on evaluating the literature being reviewed.

Perspective. As might be expected, an examination of the reviews themselves reveals a neutral perspective. However, there is virtually no explicit editorial commentary to that effect. I think this silence is indicative of the fact that neutrality was assumed. A review would not be a place to advocate a particular point of view. However, a telling comment--which I'll consider a seed of change--is made by the issue editor in the first issue: "It was our purpose not only to review the research studies, but to convey the impression that curriculum making is a coherent process" (Editor, 1931, p. 3). It's likely there was more advocating going on in this first stage than was ever acknowledged in the editorial commentary.

Coverage. Initially the intent was "to include, so far as possible, all the scientific discussions which bear upon the topic, either directly or indirectly." (Editors, 1931, p. 2). The operant word in this call was scientific. Though exhaustive reviews were expected, the studies reviewed had to meet their rigid criteria of what constitutes good research. Exactly what this is is not clear from the commentary, but it definitely implies being "scientific" which is another repeated motive for several decades. As time passed, there was some variance in this call (limiting reviews to "significant studies" for example), but the insistence on good research was the norm. When standards were relaxed, for example to review work in an area with little research, the editors apologized for including works not scientific enough or not "real research." These lapses from their typical rigid standards were, I think, seeds of change.

Organization. Using Cooper's system, virtually all chapters are organized conceptually by sub-topics of the major topic. This was not a matter discussed in the critical commentary (though logically implied by it) but evident in reading the reviews themselves. Also, from reading reviews, it's evident

that a historical organization was used within many reviews, usually in the first part. Again this was not a matter of editorial direction, but a structure implied by the triennial updating nature of the RER.

Audience. In the early cycles, the implied audience was unequivocally practitioners. Subsequent changes in format or topic were typically done to make ideas more accessible to users or be of greater service to a wider range of users. However, even in the early cycles (and this is the seed), fellow researchers were also considered part of the audience. For example, in the third issue, the general editor maintains that the reviews "should be of value in guiding the policy of administrators and should [also] point the way to future studies of problems" (1931, p. 162).

Role of Reviews. Given a continuum ranging from positivism to constructivism, a positivist view dominated commentary throughout this stage. Literature exists with truths and patterns within it. Good reviews uncovered these truths and reported them. At the same time, editorial commentary reveals an editorial awareness that they were shaping knowledge base construction in some way. Essentially this was articulated as a matter of providing a clear and coherent overview through a review so future researchers could determine directions for their studies. But even this can be considered a seed of the significant change which would finally occur in this dimension during stage two.

Stage 2--the 70's to 1991

This stage was characterized by the first batch of unsolicited reviews in RER's history. There was not massive editorial commentary during this stage, but there was editorial confirmation that the 1970 reorganization was positive: "the editorial board . . . has concluded that it [the new policy] provides a desirable flexibility in the publication of research reviews which should be continued and expanded "(Messick, 1970, p. iii). There were also the now familiar "Information to Contributors" sections which contained information about submitting manuscripts and criteria for acceptance (a necessary companion to an open market on manuscripts). Several special issues also marked this period, such as the fall 91 issue which featured an extensive paper arguing for rigor in multi vocal reviews along with several scholars' responses to this feature. This kind of special issue--a lead article followed by several responses--has now become familiar in the RER landscape.

Focus. The primary focus during this stage remained much the same as the first stage, outcomes then methodology. On the other hand, the content of this focus varied considerably, an inevitable consequence of the new editorial policy calling for unsolicited manuscripts. This policy change was initiated as an "acknowledgement of a need for and outlet for reviews of research that are initiated by individual researchers and shaped by the rapidly evolving interests of these scholars" (1970, p. iii). The editorial board's up front control of topics to be reviewed was gone; however it was replaced by something perhaps even more powerful--the choice of theme and special topics for selected issues. This choice may prove to be the seed of change within this characteristic.

Goal. This stage began with an editorial claim that the goal of RER has been consistently to publish critical, integrative reviews; and that, in fact, the RER reorganization was a means toward better achieving this goal. This very explicit emphasis on critical, integrative reviews continued throughout this stage especially in the "Information for Contributors" pages. In addition, the word interpretation entered the vocabulary of the limited commentary which occurred during this stage as well as other types of articles: the RER "includes reviews and interpretations of substantive and methodological issues . . . the Review will also occasionally publish solicited, but carefully refereed, analytical reviews of current major issues, studies, or books" (Messick, 1972, p. iii).

Perspective. The perspective was still neutral, but the word interpretation (as used above) suggests a broader view of perspectives which might be assumed by reviewers.

Coverage. Though coverage and selection criteria were frequently discussed in the first stage, I found nothing in this stage. Even the "Information for Contributors" pages were silent on this topic, leading me to conclude that editors assumed reviewers shared a conventional understanding of the kind of coverage needed for integrative reviews.

Organization. There was silence on this characteristic also. Presumably, how a review was organized would grow more or less organically from the topic and findings of the review. From reading reviews of this period, though, it's clear the IMRD format provided the macro-structure for reviews--directly for meta-analyses and best-evidence syntheses, less directly for reviews that were more narrative and interpretive.

Audience. Missing from the editorial commentary of this period are any claims that the major audience consists of practitioners. Researchers and scholars, once only occasionally mentioned as audience, became the primary target of the journal. Other audiences were mentioned or implied, such as policy makers, but the RER was no longer a journal that a practicing teacher or principal might pick up for an update on, say, curriculum (unless that practitioner had the time and inclination to wade through issues, vocabulary,

and writing styles more connected with academia than schools).
Role of Reviews. This stage began with an explicit statement about knowledge construction and the role of reviews in that process: "A body of literature can grow faster than a body of knowledge . . . if knowledge is to be "known" it must be "packed down" into assimilable portions either in reviews of literature or in textbooks. The integration of isolated research reports and the criticism of published works [underlining mine] serves an essential purpose in the growth of a discipline. The organization and maintenance of knowledge is no less important than the discovery of new knowledge" (Glass, 1970, p. iii). Some 12 years later this quote was recalled by the editor who applauded the continuity RER has brought to the profession by its 50 years of publishing superior reviews of "true knowledge" and admonished that it must continue to do so in the years ahead (Glasman, 1982). Both of these are strong statements, positioning reviews significantly in the social and political process of knowledge construction.

Stage 3--1993 to the Present

Special issues, as I stated earlier, have become familiar in the RER publication program. It was in fact one of these special issues which I think signalled the end of the second stage and formed a bridge to the third. Levin, recognizing that "the long-established tradition of the RER has been to publish only integrative and critical reviews of research on educational topics" lamented that many socially important topics go unreviewed because of the paucity of available research. Thus in the Summer,1993 issue he "breached the usual RER criteria" and published a different type of review (1993, p. 113). The topic was the quandary of attracting and retaining minority teachers, but the real type difference was not the topic but that the published article contained a limited review of a limited literature. Instead much of the review was given to the argument for and explication of a research agenda to address those limitations. Levin ends his introduction by welcoming "responses from readers on the usefulness of this type of review [underlining mine]" (p. 113).

Levin's bridge was crossed and the third stage emerged, almost at once characterized by the following features.

Focus. The focus (in Cooper's sense of the term) is definitely broader in this stage than it was in any earlier ones. More subtle, though, is the return to editorial control over the content of what's published. In refereed journals, of course, editors always have considerable control over publication; but in the first stage of the RER there was extraordinary control over not only which topics were deemed the educational topics to review, but also the reviews (because the reviews were commissioned). The second stage began, it will be remembered, by relinquishing all of this special control: reviews would be unsolicited on topics of the reviewers' choice. This third stage represents a return to earlier control. Commissioned reviews and thematic issues are brought back to be used at the discretion of the editor. In the 1997 "Notice to Authors," for example, the editors list commissioned reviews and thematic issues as something they seek along with critiques, integrative reviews, theoretical reviews, etc.

Goals. There is currently considerable variety in the types of articles published in the RER. Part of this variety is accounted for by an expansion of the types of reviews accepted (beyond critical and integrative reviews). Most notable among these are the theoretical, methodological, and historical reviews. Consider the following from the 1997 Notice to Authors.Theoretical review, unlike the critical and integrative reviews of the past, espouse a position. They "explore how theory shapes research. To the extent that research is cited and interpreted, it is in the services of the specification, explication, and illumination of a theory" (p. iii). Methodological reviews are "descriptions of research design, methods, and procedures that can be employed in literature reviews or research in general. . . highlight strengths and weaknesses . . . and explore how methods constrain or open up opportunities for learning about educational problems" (p. iii). Historical reviews "provide analyses that situate literature in historical contexts" (p. iii).

Perspective, Coverage, and Organization. These three characteristics, all dealing with review methodology, would be largely determined by the focus and goals of the particular review being written and its intended audience. Under Standards and Criteria in the 1997 Notice discussed above, coverage is addressed in the first criterion. "Any review needs to take into account the quality of the literature . . . [and] authors should attempt to review all relevant literature on a topic" (p. iii). But even this criterion is qualified in the same statement: "Standards used to determine quality of literature in education vary greatly."

Audience. As stated in the 1997 Standards and Criteria. "Any review should be accessible to the broad leadership of RER." Again, as in stage two (and contrary to stage one), the broad readership is not practitioners as much as the theorists and researchers most responsible for the construction of the educational knowledge base. This speculation is reinforced by the focus of the criteria listed as standards and criteria. Of the eight criteria listed, three point toward the publication of reviews of special value to knowledge makers: the

"significance of the topic," the "impact of the article," and the "advancement of the field."

Discussion

Further research, will include a closer examination of the reviews themselves and the contexts in which they are constructed and used. A study by Greg Meyers foregrounds the direction of these future studies. Comparing the stories and styles of two reviews in molecular biology, he argues that a "writer of a review shapes the literature of a field into a story in order to enlist the support of readers to continue that story" (1991, p. 45). The operant word here, is shapes. In part, I think Meyer's argument rests on the wide readership of reviews by researchers and others engaged in the on-going production of professional knowledge. But I think Meyer's argument rests on more than just numbers and the persuasive nature of professional knowledge production, referring also to the constitutive role of reviews in the knowledge construction process.

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